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First and Second Language Acquisition

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

﴿وَمَا تَوْفِيقِي إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ﴾

صدق الله العلي العظيم

هود: ٨٨

“In the Name of Allah, the Most Passionate, the Most Merciful”.

And my success is not but through Allah. Upon Him, I have relied, and to Him I return.

(Hud: 88)

Dedication

To those who were the reason for my existence in this life, to those who taught me the meaning of patience and diligence, and instilled in me the love of knowledge and the pursuit of excellence, and who offered me support and love without expecting anything in return.

To the soul of my beloved father, who was an example of generosity and a role model, and who will always remain a source of pride and inspiration for me in every step I take toward the future.

To my dear mother, who has always been a source of tenderness and strength in my life, and whose prayers and encouragement enabled me to continue my academic journey with hope and confidence.

I dedicate this humble work as an expression of my deepest gratitude and appreciation for all the love, sacrifices, and continuous encouragement they have given me, asking Allah to keep my mother a lasting blessing in my life, and to envelop my father in His vast mercy and grant him a place in Paradise.

Hoping that this work will be a fruit of their support and upbringing, and a simple token of gratitude for all the effort and love they have bestowed upon me.

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Abstract

This study examines the process of first and second language acquisition and explains how humans develop the ability to understand and use language. It begins by introducing the concept of language acquisition and its importance in communication, cognitive development, and social interaction. The study then explains the nature of first language acquisition as a natural process that occurs in early childhood through exposure and interaction. In addition, the study presents the main theories of first language acquisition, including the behavioristic, nativist, functional, and cognitive approaches. Each theory provides a different explanation of how language is learned, focusing on factors such as imitation, innate ability, social interaction, and cognitive development. Furthermore, the study describes the stages of first language acquisition, starting from cooing and babbling to the holophrastic, two-word, and telegraphic stages. These stages show how children gradually develop from producing simple sounds to forming meaningful sentences. Finally, the study compares first and second language acquisition, highlighting the main differences between them. While first language acquisition is natural and unconscious, second language acquisition often requires effort, practice, and formal instruction. The study concludes that language acquisition is a gradual and systematic process influenced by both internal abilities and environmental factors.

Chapter One:

1.1 Introduction

Language acquisition refers to the gradual development of the ability to use a language naturally in communicative situations with others who know the language (Yule, 2010). Language acquisition is not only a central topic in cognitive science but also crucial for understanding human communication, social interaction, and cognitive development (Pinker, 1994; Crystal, 2003). Studying how humans acquire language provides insights into the mental processes underlying communication and informs effective language teaching and learning strategies (Krashen, 1982; Chomsky, 2009).

Humans have a natural capacity to acquire language from an early age, but this process also relies heavily on interaction with the environment. Children learn language not only by hearing words but also by observing how people around them communicate (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyman, 2013). According to Aitchison (2010), the brain is naturally prepared to process linguistic input, and children gradually build their vocabulary and understanding of grammar through daily interactions with caregivers and peers. This shows that language acquisition depends on both innate ability and environmental support.

Language acquisition progresses through a series of stages that reflect cognitive and social development. Infants first develop listening and comprehension skills before producing speech, and they gradually learn to form words, sentences, and complex structures (Aitchison, 2010). Chomsky (2009) emphasizes that there is a critical period during which children can acquire language most effectively. During this time, exposure to language and opportunities for meaningful interaction are essential for developing fluent and accurate communication skills. For example, a young child growing up in an English-speaking home hears daily conversations from their parents and siblings. At first, the child recognizes words like "milk" or "ball," then starts imitating sounds, forming single words, and gradually producing short sentences. This example illustrates how children acquire their first language naturally through constant exposure and social interaction, without formal teaching (Aitchison, 2010; Fromkin et al., 2013).

Language acquisition is the process through which children gain fluent control of their native language (Varshney, 2003). It is a natural way by which human beings subconsciously obtain their first language and use it to produce speech. This process usually begins in early childhood and continues from infancy to adulthood (Aitchison, 2010).

Children all over the world acquire their first language naturally without formal teaching. Language acquisition is different from learning other skills such as swimming or dancing, and it is less affected by intellectual disabilities compared to other skills (Lyons, 1981). According to Chomsky (2009), language acquisition depends on the growth and development of fixed mental abilities under suitable conditions. The language a child acquires is mainly shaped by internal factors. Because all human languages share common features and all humans are similar, any child can learn any language. Language ability works best during a certain critical period of development.

1.2 What Language Acquisition Is

Language acquisition is the process through which children gain fluent control of their native language (Varshney, 2003:307). It is a natural way by which human beings subconsciously obtain their first language and use it to produce speech. Therefore, language acquisition usually refers to first language learning. However, first language acquisition does not only mean the language learned in childhood for the first time, but it also refers to any language a person acquires for the first time. In other words, any language that a person learns for the first time can be called first language acquisition, even if the person already has another primary language. A person can acquire a language as a first, second, or third language, as long as it is new to them. This process is what we call language acquisition, and it mainly refers to the first experience of acquiring a language.

Language acquisition develops slowly. During this process, listening skills usually develop faster than speaking skills (Krashen, 1982). The process of acquiring a language follows a natural order and is similar for all learners. This process begins early in life and continues from infancy to adulthood. The ability to understand and use language is inherited genetically, but the specific language a

child speaks is learned through culture and environment. Children all over the world acquire their first language naturally without formal teaching. Language acquisition is different from learning other skills such as swimming or dancing. It is also less affected by intellectual disabilities compared to other skills. Every normal child learns at least one language unless raised without language exposure, and most children learn the basic structure of their language by the age of six.

According to Chomsky (2009:101–102), language acquisition depends on the growth and development of fixed mental abilities under suitable conditions. The language a child acquires is mainly shaped by internal factors. Because all human languages share common features and all humans are similar, any child can learn any language. Language ability works best during a certain critical period of development. The term “language acquisition” usually refers to learning one’s native language. Learning a foreign language, whether in school or naturally, may happen in a different way. In fact, acquiring a native language after the critical period may differ from normal child language acquisition due to neurological reasons (Lyons, 1981:252).

1.3 First Language Acquisition

First language acquisition (L1) is a natural process that happens in early childhood. Children acquire their native language without formal teaching, simply by being exposed to it in everyday life. This shows that humans are born with a natural ability to learn language (Yule, 2010).

Children’s interaction with caregivers and peers is essential. During the first years of life, a child connects their natural ability to learn language with the specific language they hear daily (Fromkin et al., 2013). Without exposure or interaction, a child may not acquire a full language system. Cultural transmission plays a key role. The language a child learns is not inherited but comes from the environment. Children learn the sounds, words, and grammar of their language by listening and interacting with those around them (Fromkin et al., 2013).

Listening and speaking skills develop gradually. Although babies begin with simple vocalizations, their understanding of language grows steadily. Listening

skills usually develop faster than speaking skills, which allows children to comprehend more than they can produce (Krashen, 1982).

Humans are believed to have a "language instinct". Pinker (2011) explains that children have mental structures that help them learn grammar and communicate without formal lessons. By being exposed to language, children naturally pick up rules and patterns.

Language development happens best during a critical period. Chomsky (2009) argues that children acquire complex grammatical structures more easily at a young age. During this period, exposure to language and social interaction are crucial for developing full language skills.

Children also develop language systematically. They begin with simple words and short sentences and gradually progress to more complex expressions (Yule, 2010). This shows that first language acquisition is a structured process, guided by both natural ability and the surrounding environment. Finally, the speed and success of L1 acquisition depend on several factors: the child's innate abilities, the quality of interaction with caregivers, and the cultural environment (Fromkin et al., 2013). Children raised in rich language environments typically achieve fluency faster and with better comprehension.

1.4 First vs Second Language Acquisition

Language acquisition has long been a central topic in linguistics and psychology because it explains how humans develop the ability to understand and use language. Researchers clearly distinguish between first language acquisition, which happens naturally in early childhood, and second language acquisition, which usually happens later in life and often under different learning conditions (Fromkin et al., 2013). Understanding the differences between these two processes helps explain how people develop language skills at different ages and in different situations (Yule, 2010).

First language acquisition (L1) occurs naturally during early childhood. Children quickly learn to use language for communication and self-expression without formal teaching. This shows that humans are born with a natural ability to learn language (Yule, 2010). However, children also need interaction with

caregivers and people around them to learn a specific language properly (Fromkin et al., 2013). During the first years of life, listening to and talking with others helps children connect their natural language ability to the language they hear every day.

Cultural transmission is also important. The language a child learns is not inherited; it comes from the environment and the people they interact with (Fromkin et al., 2013). Children must be able to hear and produce sounds. All babies start with "cooing" and "babbling" in their first year (Yule, 2010). Children who are deaf or have little exposure to language may not develop spoken language unless they use a sign language system. For example, Moskowitz (1991) reported a boy with deaf parents who could hear sounds from TV and radio, but he did not learn to speak English. Instead, he learned American Sign Language, which his parents used to communicate with him.

Children acquire their first language in stages. They start with cooing, then babbling, then single words, and finally short sentences (Yule, 2010). Listening skills usually develop before speaking, and children gradually learn more complex structures over time (Krashen, 1982). Children are born with a "language instinct," a natural ability to acquire language. According to Pinker (2011), humans have mental structures that help them learn grammar and communication skills simply by being exposed to language in their environment. First language acquisition depends on both this natural ability and interaction with others.

Second language acquisition (L2) is different because it usually happens later in life. L2 learning often requires conscious effort, study, and practice. Learners may need to memorize vocabulary, learn grammar rules, and practice speaking in structured situations (Fromkin et al., 2013). Age affects how easily people learn a second language. Children learning a second language early can reach near-native fluency, while adults may struggle with pronunciation and grammar (Pinker, 2011). Therefore, L1 is natural, fast, and mostly unconscious, while L2 often requires instruction, practice, and effort. Both, however, need exposure, interaction, and practice to develop strong language skills (Yule, 2010; Fromkin et al., 2013)

Chapter Two:

2.1 Theories / Approaches of First Language Acquisition

2.1. a. Behaviouristic Approach

The Behaviorist Theory, developed by B.F. Skinner in the 1950s, emphasizes that language is acquired primarily through learned behavior rather than innate abilities. According to this approach, children gradually develop linguistic skills by imitating words and sentences they hear, repeating them, and receiving reinforcement from caregivers or their environment. Positive responses, such as praise or giving the requested object, strengthen the likelihood of the behavior being repeated. The approach suggests that the environment and repeated practice play a crucial role in shaping the child's language development, and that learning occurs step by step as verbal behaviors are rewarded (Brown, 2007).

When a child says “milk” and receives milk in response, the behavior is reinforced, increasing the probability that the child will use the word correctly in future similar situations. Over time, repeated reinforcement helps children acquire vocabulary and simple sentence structures, demonstrating how environmental feedback guides language learning (McLeod, 2013).

Key Principles:

1. Language learning is based on imitation of speech heard in the environment.
2. Positive reinforcement strengthens the likelihood of repeating correct linguistic behaviours.
3. The child's environment, including interactions with caregivers and teachers, is central to developing language skills.
4. Repetition and practice are essential for gradually mastering pronunciation, vocabulary, and basic grammar structures (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The Behaviorist Theory has been criticized for its inability to explain creative aspects of language, such as forming sentences never heard before. It also does not account for the speed and uniformity of language acquisition across cultures, nor the fact that children often acquire complex grammar without explicit

reinforcement. Critics argue that while the theory explains basic repetition and habit formation, it cannot fully account for the generative nature of human language (Skinner, 1957).

2.1.b The Nativist Approach

The Nativist Theory, developed by Noam Chomsky in the 1960s, proposes that humans are biologically prepared to acquire language. Children are believed to have an innate capacity called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), which allows them to detect grammatical patterns and structures naturally. Exposure to language activates this system, enabling rapid acquisition of complex rules. The theory also introduces Universal Grammar (UG), suggesting that all human languages share a common underlying structure (Chomsky, 1965).

A child might say “I goed to the park,” overgeneralizing the past tense rule. This demonstrates the child’s internalized grammatical system rather than mere imitation of speech, showing how innate structures shape language development (Brown, 2007).

Key Principles:

1. Language acquisition is largely innate.
2. The LAD allows children to learn grammar without explicit instruction.
3. Exposure to language activates innate capacities.
4. Universal Grammar provides a framework common to all languages, making acquisition consistent across cultures (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The Nativist Theory does not fully explain the role of social interaction and environmental input. Some children exposed to different environments acquire language at varying rates, suggesting that innate abilities alone cannot account for all aspects of language learning (McLeod, 2013).

2.1.c Functional Approach

The Functional or Social Interactionist Theory, associated with Lev Vygotsky in the 1970s, emphasizes that language development is strongly shaped by social interaction and cultural context. Language initially serves communicative purposes, such as requesting objects or expressing needs. Through interaction with more

knowledgeable individuals, children gradually internalize language as a tool for thinking and reasoning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

A child says “milk” to request it. Through repeated interactions and guidance from adults, the child learns to combine words into longer sentences, illustrating how social interaction fosters language development (Brown, 2007).

Key Principles:

1. Social interaction is essential for language acquisition.
2. Language initially serves practical, communicative purposes.
3. Guidance or scaffolding from adults supports gradual learning.
4. Meaningful dialogue and participation in cultural activities shape linguistic competence (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

This approach may overemphasize social factors while underestimating innate cognitive abilities. It also does not fully explain language acquisition in children with limited social interaction, indicating that social input alone is insufficient for complete mastery (McLeod, 2013).

2.1. d Cognitive Theory

The Cognitive Theory, developed by Jean Piaget in the 1950s and 1960s, views language acquisition as part of general cognitive development. Language emerges alongside conceptual understanding, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities. Children must first develop certain mental structures before acquiring specific linguistic skills. Thought and understanding drive language, rather than language shaping thought (Piaget, 1959).

A child must understand the concept of time before using past tense verbs correctly, such as “I ate breakfast”, showing that cognitive readiness determines the ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences (Brown, 2007).

Key Principles:

1. Language development is linked to overall cognitive growth.
2. Conceptual understanding guides acquisition of grammar and vocabulary.
3. Intellectual abilities precede the use of certain linguistic structures.
4. Language emerges as a tool for expressing thought, not as a separate module (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The Cognitive Theory may underestimate the influence of social interaction and environmental input. Children sometimes acquire words or structures through imitation or reinforcement even before full cognitive readiness, indicating that cognition alone cannot explain all aspects of language learning (McLeod, 2013).

Chapter Three:

3.1 Stages in First Language Acquisition

First language acquisition develops through a series of natural stages that reflect the child's cognitive and linguistic growth. These stages appear in a similar order among children, although the exact age may vary. Each stage shows progress in sound production, meaning, and communication. According to (Yule, 2010), these stages follow a general pattern, while (Fromkin et al, 2013) emphasize that individual differences between children are normal.

3.1.a Pre-talking Stage / Cooing (0–6 months)

The pre-talking stage, also known as the cooing stage, begins from birth until about six months of age. In this stage, the infant produces soft vowel-like sounds such as “oooh” and “aaah” without clear meaning. According to (Yule, 2010), these sounds develop as the child learns to control the vocal organs, especially the tongue and lips. Around four to five months, the baby can also produce sounds similar to consonants like /k/ and /g/, often described as “gooing”. For example, a baby may coo while smiling or interacting with caregivers.

In addition, (Pinker, 1994) explains that infants at this stage are already able to recognize differences between sounds, which shows early development of perception. This stage is important because it prepares the child for speech production and builds the foundation for later language development. It also plays a role in strengthening the relationship between the child and caregivers through early vocal interaction. Moreover, frequent exposure to speech at this stage supports better listening skills later on.

3.1.b Babbling Stage (6–8 months)

The babbling stage usually occurs between six and eight months and shows clear progress in speech development. In this stage, the infant produces repeated consonant-vowel combinations such as “ba-ba,” “da-da,” and “ma-ma.” These sounds are not meaningful yet but represent an important step toward real language. As the child develops, babbling becomes more varied and may include patterns like “ba-da,” with changes in rhythm and intonation. For example, parents may interpret

“ma-ma” as “mama,” even though the child does not intend this meaning (Yule, 2010).

Furthermore, this stage reflects the child’s ability to experiment with sounds and imitate what they hear. This stage is important because it helps develop pronunciation skills and introduces the child to the social role of language. In addition, repetition in babbling helps strengthen memory and sound recognition. It also encourages interaction, as adults often respond to these sounds, which motivates the child to continue vocalizing (Fromkin et al, 2013)

3.1.c Holophrastic Stage (9–18 months)

The holophrastic stage takes place between nine and eighteen months and is the first stage where children use real words for communication. In this stage, the child produces single words that express complete ideas. According to (Yule, 2010), words such as “milk,” “ball,” and “cup” are commonly used to refer to everyday objects. However, one word may have different meanings depending on the context. For example, “milk” may mean, “I want milk” or “Give me milk.”

In addition, children at this stage begin to use words symbolically, even referring to things that are not present. This stage is important because it shows the beginning of meaningful communication and the connection between language and thought. It also reflects the child’s growing ability to store and recall information. Furthermore, children start to understand more words than they can produce, which shows that comprehension develops faster than speaking (Pinker, 1994).

3.1.d The Two-word Stage (18–24 months)

The two-word stage usually begins between eighteen and twenty-four months when the child’s vocabulary increases. In this stage, children start combining two words such as “mommy eat,” “baby chair,” and “daddy go.” These combinations are simple but meaningful, and their interpretation depends on context. For example, “baby chair” may express possession or a request depending on the situation (Yule, 2010).

Moreover, children at this stage begin to understand basic sentence structure, even if grammar is not fully developed. This stage is important because it marks the beginning of syntax and shows the child’s ability to organize words to express

relationships. In addition, children begin to use language more actively to express needs and feelings. This stage also shows clear development in thinking skills, as the child starts to connect ideas together in a simple form. (Fromkin, et al, 2013)

3.1.e Telegraphic Stage (24–30 months)

According to (Yule, 2010), the telegraphic stage occurs between twenty-four and thirty months and shows rapid development in language use. In this stage, children produce short sentences such as “cat drink milk” or “daddy go work”. These sentences focus on key content words while grammatical elements are often omitted. However, children still manage to express clear meanings.

In addition, (Pinker, 1994) explains that children at this stage begin to develop grammatical awareness and gradually move toward more complete sentence structures. This stage is important because it shows progress toward adult-like language, including sentence formation and grammar development. It also reflects a rapid increase in vocabulary and confidence in speaking. Furthermore, children become more active in conversations and can respond more appropriately in social situations.

Conclusion

Language acquisition is a natural and complex process that enables humans to develop the ability to understand and use language from early childhood. First language acquisition occurs in a predictable sequence of stages. It begins with early vocalizations such as cooing and babbling, and progressing gradually to more structured speech forms like holophrastic, two-word, and telegraphic stages. These stages show that language develops gradually in connection with the child's cognitive and social growth.

The study of different theories of first language acquisition shows that no single explanation is enough to describe the whole process. The behaviouristic approach highlights the role of imitation and reinforcement, while the nativist approach emphasizes the presence of an innate ability for language learning. The functional or social interactionist view focuses on the importance of social communication and interaction, whereas the cognitive theory explains language development as part of general intellectual growth. These theories provide a more complete understanding of how language is acquired.

In addition, the comparison between first and second language acquisition shows clear differences in terms of naturalness, speed, and learning conditions. First language acquisition happens unconsciously and is strongly influenced by exposure and interaction in early childhood, while second language acquisition often requires conscious effort, practice, and instruction. Finally, this research confirms that language acquisition is a gradual and developmental process influenced by both internal abilities and external factors.

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